

# The Day

## Needed In Storrs: A College Town

UConn launches a plan to build one from scratch

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**Storrs** — The University of Connecticut's main campus boasts a string of new buildings, thanks to a multibillion-dollar infusion of state cash. The student body is growing. And there are two powerhouse basketball teams that bring big-time sports to a rural corner of the state.

There's one thing, however, that UConn doesn't have: a college town.

So it has decided to help build one from scratch — complete with shops, restaurants, hundreds of apartments and even a traditional New England town green.

The project exemplifies the growing interest of colleges and universities in their surrounding communities. Many have realized that a building boom of dormitories, student centers and libraries isn't enough. Students don't want an "ivory tower" experience; they want to be part of broader communities that offer commerce, culture and cuisine.

But while many colleges are working to expand or revitalize nearby neighborhoods, this project may be unique in that it is trying to construct one anew.

"People ask us if there are other examples," says Cynthia van Zelm, executive director of the Mansfield Downtown Partnership. "I'm like, 'No, not really.'"

Most colleges, even small rural ones, have grown up around a town or spawned one, as businesses opened to keep students supplied with books, pizza, beer and coffee.

Thanks to accidents of geography, infrastructure and municipal history, that never really happened here. Even though 20,000 people attend school on campus, the tiny village of Storrs is little more than a handful of businesses in a strip mall, a post office and a dateline for stories about the



*This architectural rendering shows the town square for a planned college town that the University of Connecticut hopes to build by 2013 near its Storrs campus. The new "Storrs Center" would contain retail stores, restaurants, offices and residences.*

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*Dolan Evanovich, vice provost for enrollment management*

basketball teams.

Surveys of admitted students who turn down UConn, and of students who drop out, show the lack of off-campus options is the chief complaint. Most students can't have cars until they earn 54 credits.

"We were getting comments like, 'I really like the education but you walk across the street and there's nothing there,'" said Dolan Evanovich, vice provost for enrollment management. "The expectation is the creation of a town will be the missing link."

The plans are slow-moving, with completion targeted for 2013. And the mayor of Mansfield — the town that includes the village of Storrs — points out the university is just one of several players.

But for UConn, the project is a matter of urgency because of the college's growth in the past decade. Two initiatives by the Legislature have committed more than \$2.3 billion to the university, and much of that money has gone into a building boom on the Storrs campus.

During the last 10 years, average SAT scores have risen 82 points, says Evanovich. The percentage of students from out of state has doubled from 15 percent to 30 percent, demonstrating the school's emerging national appeal.

Renderings of the town project depict bustling shops and restaurants, with apartments above them. Construction on the first building of what will grow into a \$175 million, 50-acre project (including 35 protected acres) could begin this summer.

Most of the financing will be private. The developer, LeylandAlliance, specializes in dense but pedestrian-friendly and environmentally sensitive communities in a style called "new urbanism." The new "Storrs Center" will stand across the street from a proposed fine arts building to be designed by Frank Gehry.

The challenge is imbuing the place with the kind of charm that other college towns have acquired over decades and even centuries, without making it feel artificial or forced.

"We don't have that 300 years to create a place that has that organic quality," said Macon Toledano, who is overseeing the project for LeylandAlliance. But, he said, the careful study that has gone into what the community wants and how the buildings will be used will eventually produce a place with most of the virtues of more seasoned college towns.

The local community also has a lot riding on the partnership, which both sides say has gone some way to repair strained relations between the university and Mansfield. The mayor, Elizabeth Paterson (who also works at UConn), says people here have been talking at least since the 1960s about the need for some kind of town center in Storrs.

"We need a place where friends and neighbors can come together with other friends and neighbors while they're getting a cup of coffee or going to the post office," she said. Mansfield also needs to expand its tax base and derive more revenue from the thousands who visit campus.

"Why do they have to go out of town to get a nice meal?" she said.

The same thought has occurred to Nathaniel Slade, a junior from Bolton, Mass., though he hadn't been aware of the plans.

"I kind of like the idea of going to a college a little out in the country because I don't like to deal with

the city," he said. "But sometimes something else would be nice too."

*University of Connecticut: [www.uconn.edu](http://www.uconn.edu)*

*Mansfield town plan: [www.mansfieldct.org/town/departments/downtown—partnership/](http://www.mansfieldct.org/town/departments/downtown—partnership/) ■*